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ABSTRACT

This panel discussion document about portfolio evaluation of student writing consists of three presentations from faculty members of Lynchburg College in Virginia, who describe the introduction of a portfolio-assessment system in their writing program. In this system students choose the three papers they want to rewrite for inclusion in their portfolios, and final evaluation of each paper is done by at least two teachers. The first presentation, "The Open Academy: Freshmen and Faculty, in the Community of Professional Discourse," by Jane Melbourne, addresses how the system was set up, how the students responded to it, and how the system has affected the ways instructors teach and the ways students write. The second presntation, entitled "The Travelling Road Show and the Silent Classroom: Experimentation with the Portfolio-Assessment System," by Elsie Ervin Block, describes two experimental techniques used within that system: a demonstration response group comprised of four teachers critiquing one of their own papers in front of a class, and group writing classes conducted with no talking by anyone, with written communication only. The final presentation, by James Hunter, is entitled "Portfolio Assessment and Program Development: Toward a Coherent Theory of Advanced Writing"; this paper discusses the use of portfolio evaluation in advanced composition courses and in writing across the curriculum. (KEH)

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Portfolio Assessment, Group Response, and Academic Dialogue: Empowering Change in Writing Programs. Panel Papers.

Presented by

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CS 212 100

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Presentation #1
Lynchburg College Panel
Experimentaation within
the Portfolio System
CCCC, March 16, 1989

The Open Academy: Freshmen and Faculty in the Community of Professional Discourse

The lead article in a recent issue of College Composition and Communication questions whether we as a profession know what we mean when we talk about "community" in the context of teaching writing. This is a pertinent question for a panelist whose paper includes the word "community" in its title and for her colleagues as well. Let me assure you, therefore, that, of course, we know what we mean, and for that matter that each of us means something just a bit different, an admission that may recommend Joseph Harris's suggestion that "community" be defined as a sort of space in which competing beliefs and practices intersect and confront one another," that "allows for both consensus and conflict" and "holds room for ourselves, our disciplinary colleagues, our university co-workers and our students."

Such a definition encompasses what went on in a dialogue of action and reaction at Lynchburg College between teachers who wanted to introduce portfolio evaluation of student writing and our freshman students, who wanted us to function the way they expected teachers to function -- that is, as authority figures. In this paper I propose to report why we wanted a portfolio system, how we set it up, how our students responded to it, how we changed it as a result of their response, and how, finally, we have a system that works for us and that has affected the ways we teach and the ways they write. This system does not give us precisely what we thought we wanted, but it has yielded benefits we could not have anticipated.

What we wanted was to remove ourselves from the position of being final evaluators of our own students' work. We had all experienced the sharp difference in attitude and performance of students between the first third of so of a term, when we had had them write frequently, but had not graded their work, and the rest of the term, when we had felt duty bound to give grades. We were comfortable conferring with students and making formative evaluations, but not comfortable about giving final grades to papers for which we had been in some sense collaborators. In short, we wanted to be coaches, not umpires or scorekeepers, and we believed that the mid-term shift in roles from coach to something else undercut the effectiveness of our teaching, that we got better writing from our students when we were pulling for them than when we were judging them.

In order not to evaluate our own students, we needed a

portfolio system, and we needed to train ourselves as reliable readers of other teachers' papers. We had read articles on portfolio evaluation by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff, and I had had experience in training high school teachers in holistic scoring. So we had a start. Our plan was that, within certain guidelines, each student would choose three papers on which, at the end of the semester, she wished to be evaluated. But both we and our students needed at least one "dry run" to test our plan.

For the students a dry run meant keeping the score on a paper if it pleased them and including this dry run paper in the final portfolio, but having the opportunity to revise and resubmit the paper or substitute another paper if the grade did not please. It included a guarantee that no final score would be lower than the original if the revision or substitution didn't work. The dry run is a feature we have kept, using it either once or twice a semester before the final portfolio is submitted.

For us, a dry run meant the opportunity to train ourselves in holistic evaluation. In doing so , we went through almost all the steps we would have gone through if we had planned to read 2000 papers instead of the approximately 200 we in fact read. The one step we skipped was designing a prompt. We merely agreed that in all our classes, our first assignments would be personal essays. We agreed upon a six point scale; selected anchor papers for each of the six points on our scale from our pool of papers; wrote descriptors of the anchors (see handout); trained ourselves as readers by reading and scoring papers together to calibrate ourselves to the group norm, and recalibrated ourselves during the day of our reading by repeating this process. We read each student paper twice, accepting a score on the paper as reliable if two readers were within one point on their evaluations, and giving the paper to a third reader if they were not; and we devised a means of recording scores so that no reader knew how an earlier reader had scored a paper. Carrying out these activities took longer than we had anticipated. We selected anchors and wrote descriptors on a Friday evening, and read papers all day Saturday. Our reward for this day and a half of work was that by day's end we were confident of our evaluation criteria and of ourselves as evaluators.

There was, of course, something basically different between the usual purposes of holistic evaluation -- placing students in regular or remedial classes, for instance, on the basis of an holistically scored placement essay -- and our purpose, which was to use holistic scores as a major determinant of a student's final letter grade in a course. We were conscious of the implications of this difference, but believed that our scores, based on papers alone, were in fact more fair than those of an instructor who had to separate the writer she knew from the paper she was reading. We were so sure that, on our first dry run, we returned papers to students marked only with a numerical score. But more on that later. Quite as fundamentally, we believed, and still believe, that the amount of formative evaluation the student now received and her opportunity to submit as many

revisions as she was willing to write, compensated for any possible bias against the student in the holistic evaluation.

In fact, the ability to revise papers is a major advantage of the portfolio system as we use it. Students do not have to be told that revision is a part of the writing process, for no grade is final and no paper is finished until the portfolio is submitted for the last time at the end of the semester. It is true that we are constantly rereading papers, but we probably spend no more total time reading than we did before. It takes less time, and certainly less energy, to point out what is good in a paper and what can be made better than to justify a grade.

We were pleased with the results of our first dry run. Within a few days, we were able to return the essays to our students, along with copies of the descriptors we had written. The descriptors were well received. Many students were genuinely surprised that there were objective criteria by which an essay could be evaluated, and for future assignments some of us tailored variations on our original descriptors for students to use during the process of writing and revising.

But we did become aware that ours were not the only voices in our community of discourse. Some of our students were very angry about the scores they had received and attributed low scores to our innovative evaluation. They believed that their grades were lower than the grades of students enrolled in non-portfolio composition classes. They directed their outrage, however, at two features of our evaluation system:

First, the paper returned to them was marked with only a number; there was no explanation of why the paper had received the score it received. Second, their own teacher had not determined the grade, thus no consideration was given to how hard they might have worked to produce this paper.

The students who were most unhappy could not be placated with the assurance that they, unlike their fellows in non-portfolio classes, could revise their papers until they got them right.

I cannot speak on this point for the other members of the portfolio committee, but my first reactions to these objections were that they were unfair. How could my students complain about not receiving a response to their final paper when I had poured out words, spoken and written, when they had been writing the paper, poured out words when my words had really mattered. As to their not being evaluated by their own teacher, I suspected the complaints came from those who had developed to a fine art the skill of playing their teachers and were now frustrated in their attempts to do so.

I am perhaps overemphasizing resistance. After all, only two or three students transferred out of my classes and into non-portfolio classes at the end of that first semester, and only one

faculty member from another department wrote to my department chair, on behalf of his advisee, protesting my unfair grading practices -- to a chairman who was also a member of the Portfolio committee. Yet, clearly, our community was one which included discourses other than our own.

We began to listen, and we began to look at the features to which some of our students particularly objected. By Spring semester, course instructors became the first readers of their own students' papers, then giving their essays to a second and, if necessary, a third reader. . By this time, too, our reading of each other's papers had become less formal. We exchanged papers, but we did not spend a day together as a group reading. Also, we did not coordinate assignments. Given an instructor's prompt, we discovered we could reliably read his papers. At this time, too, we, as first readers, began to write short summary evaluations to accompany our holistic scores. These comments were based directly on the descriptors, were not burdensome to write, and did serve as the explanation of the score students had asked for. Soon, some second readers, two using their word processors to do so, began writing short summative evaluations, also tied to the descriptors, to accompany their scores.

Thus we did modify our plan because of expressed student dissatisfaction. We had sought to decentralize our classroom by stepping out of our role as evaluators. Our students wouldn't quite let us do that. But in effect, in letting their voices influence how we evaluated them, we gave them more real power to share in decisions about the way they are taught than our original plan would have done.

We did not get to be coaches, but we realized benefits from our introduction of portfolio evaluation that made up for that disappointment.

The Portfolio Committee itself became a discourse community in which we could talk about evaluation -- why we <u>had</u> split scores on certain papers, for instance -- but about issues other than evaluation as well. We also began to do other things together related to the teaching of writing. For instance, we assist Jim Hunter in training Writing Center tutors in holistic evaluation so that they can better help our students. We go through with them the same process of reading, scoring, and discussing papers together that we had gone through ourselves on the day of our first reading. By doing so, of course, we recalibrate ourselves as evaluators at the same time.

Moreover, we are making converts. Other members of the English Department have joined us in using portfolio evaluation. Last year we were five; this year we are eight. In addition, we are being called upon by colleagues on an inter-departmental committee working toward cross-curricular reading-writing-and speaking to provide training to faculty members in a variety of disciplines on how to evaluate students' written work.

And most gratifying, portfolio evaluation, with an accompanying emphasis on revision, is accepted by our students, accepted with little comment now, simply as the way things are done.

(CCCC Presentation)

THE TRAVELLING ROAD SHOW AND THE SILENT CLASSROOM: EXPERIMENTATION WITHIN THE PORTFOLIO-ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

Presenter: Elsie Ervin Bock
Lynchburg College

(Paper #2 in a panel entitled PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT, GROUP RESPONSE AND ACADEMIC DIALOGUE: EMPOWERING CHANGE IN WRITING PROGRAMS)

Jane has described to you our Portfolio-Assessment System, in which students choose the three papers they want to rewrite for inclusion in their portfolios and in which final evaluation of each paper in the portfolio is done by at least two teachers.

What I want to do now is tell you about two experimental techniques we have used within that system. First, though, I need to make clear to you that in conjunction with this evaluation system we use what is now a pretty standard technique--response groups within the class. In other words, we divide the class into small groups for reading and responding to each other's drafts. This of course is nothing new. Probably most of you use a similar procedure. We have added an element, however, that we think makes this technique more effective. We use a demonstration response group--or, as we like to call it, our travelling road show. Here's how it works: The teacher writes a paper, in rough draft, similar to that assigned to the class. Three other teachers come into the class and act as a response group, critiquing the teacher's paper in front of the class. When they come into the room a copy of the draft is given to each of them and to each student in the class. The teacher/writer usually reads the paper aloud; the three visiting teachers spend a few minutes rereading it and jotting down notes. Then they discuss it, beginning with something positive and moving to questions about sentence structure, diction, organization, and substance--the usual elements we comment on in a theme. The teacher/writer responds, and may also ask questions; and finally the discussion is opened up to the class, who almost always have questions and comments.

This procedure is scary--for the teacher writing the paper for public airing, and for the teachers who come in to do a public critique of a paper they have not seen beforehand. But we have found it to have values that make it worth the extra work and added stress. Obviously, it is a demonstration. It teaches the students how a response group is supposed to work. But it also has other values. In the first place, the teacher is put into the same position as the students, with the same kind of vulnerability. The students recognize that and see their teacher in a different light--as one who is imperfect, as they are, and as one whose writing <u>also</u> needs revision, as theirs does. They also see that writing

is not a cut-and-dried, right-and-wrong activity. They see that we teachers can actually disagree about a sentence, or a word usage, or the effectiveness of a conclusion. And they see us getting excited about the paper we're critiquing. We can be passionate about a good phrase; or about effective parallel structure; or we get carried away--as our chairman did once--about the wonders of the semi-colon! The important thing is that they see four professors sitting in front of them taking a piece of writing seriously, and enjoying doing it.

You might be interested in how the students respond. They are extremely attentive, and they participate with honesty. They ask good questions. Sometimes, of course, they become protective of their teacher. "How can they criticize you?" one of my students asked me later. I reminded him that they criticized me in order to help me to write a better paper. Some students in Tom Allen's class were very resentful of me (Tom told me later). "That mean lady" they called me, because, in spite of the fact that I said his paper was very moving and effective, I had also made negative comments about certain parts. But as he told his class, he only agreed with one of those negative comments and so did not follow the other suggestions. That class learned that one can like a paper, tremendously, and still find weaknesses in it, and also that the writer of the paper never relinquishes ownership--He doesn't have to take every suggestion given.

I've used this demonstration response group in all my Freshman English sections for the past two years and quite frankly consider this the most valuable single hour of the semester--not just for what it actually teaches but also for the way it alters attitudes and perceptions.

The second experiment I want to tell you about is one that would not have been possible had we not already established a successful discourse community--a class that was already comfortable critiquing each other's writing and working in small groups. I call this my Experiment in Silence. The idea came to me last year as I was sitting in a session, such as this, at the 4 C's, listening to someone talking about the difference between the experience of talking and the experience of writing. And the idea struck me. Have a class with no talking, with written communication only! I went back to Lynchburg College and tried it.

The timing was right. It was a little beyond mid-semester, in that "Just-Spring" time, when the students are beginning to get that glazed look; when you suddenly look around you in the middle of your 102 class and wonder what you're doing and where you're going; when you peer searchingly at your syllabus, hoping somewhere to find a sense of purpose. It was that time of year. I planned the unit very carefully, because total confidence is necessary in this procedure.

I gave no warning to my students. I had assigned a story--"Good Country People" by Flannery O'Connor. I arrived early to class and, as they came into the room, handed each of them a sheet of instructions. When they tried to talk, I put my finger to my lips and just pointed to their instruction sheet, which read: "Good morning. Beginning today, this class will be following an experimental procedure..." The sheet gave very specific instructions of how to communicate and what to do. Then I gave each student a slip of paper with a topic on it to serve as the focus of an analytical theme--the name of a character or a theme or technique from the story, "Good Country People." There were five or six topics in all, so that three or four people had the same focus for their papers. For about half the period they worked individually, brainstorming and working on a rough draft of a paper. Then, with a note on the board, I indicated they were to get into their groups (a procedure they were thoroughly familiar with) and begin discussing the story and their paper ideas--without talk, of course. Everyone in a group was working on the same topic. They passed their papers around, and each person wrote comments and asked questions about each paper in the group. At the end of the period the students took their papers and comments home with instructions to bring back a completed draft the next period.

One young man, after that first day, was absolutely bug-eyed as he left the classroom muttering: "I haven't been quiet this long in my whole life!"

The next class session they returned with completed drafts and I followed basically the same procedure of handing out a sheet of instructions and having them get into groups. This time my written instructions expressed sympathy for their frustrations but again insisted upon strict silence. This second day they spent the whole period in their groups doing the written critiques. Again, each person made individual comments and signed them, with the understanding that the group had some responsibility for the quality of the papers in their group. On both days I was busy the entire hour, answering their questions and helping when needed--in writing, of course. At the end of the second class, writers took their papers and comments home, revised, and prepared a typed draft.

On the third day, students turned in their typed drafts, with all comments and earlier drafts attached. And on that day, for the first time, we talked about the story. Within a week I returned their papers and group critiques with my comments on both, still without actual grades, and they were allowed a final rewrite before putting their papers into portfolios.

For you to see real evidence of the effectiveness of this experiment in empowering students to write better papers, I would need to show you an entire set of finished papers and have you

compare them with other papers from the same students. Since this is obviously impractical, I can only assure you that indeed the papers were generally good, especially considering that they were written before I had discussed the story with them. What I can more practically demonstrate is the quality of the critiquing that came out of this venture. I've chosen to read you a few segments, just samplings, from their group comments. I was pleased with how specific their comments were, and with the thought they showed.

(One said) "Good essay. I like the paragraph describing the initial meeting of Hulga and the Bible Salesman. Add more illustrations/quotes from book to better support your points."

One said, "I like how you said she was smart but not street-smart."

I often heard echoes of my own phrases in their critiques. "Add, develop, put some meat on it--at this stage it's bony--like an outline."

They helped each other focus, something students find difficult to do in the analytical paper. One suggested: "I think you should focus on disguises, or why people seem simple on the outside but not so simple on the inside."

They didn't let each other get away with unclear statements. One wrote: "You say 'Hulga is an atheist.' How is that an irony? Explain."

One said: "Megs, the paper is good, but what the hell! This is the Mrs. Hopewell group, not the Joy/Hulga group! What's up?"

One writer asks: "Do you think my introduction would be too long if I wrote a few more paragraphs on irony? Should I shorten it?" The answer from a group member was exactly what I would have said: "I think you should shorten your introduction and get right into the irony. Don't spend so much time telling the story!"

Sometimes they questioned interpretation: "Do you really think Mrs. Hopewell is a caring, sweet, open-minded humble person?"

One went so far as to say: "Probably you should reread the story. Some of the facts are out of place. Such as Hulga doesn't live with Mrs. Freeman and her daughters but rather with her mother in the main house."

One wrote an encouraging comment, then said, "what you said in the last paragraph, about 'if the relationship was looked into more closely.' That leaves you open for Mrs. Bock to say give me some examples of this or expand it out. I would scratch that remark." (They know me well!)

Some of the weaker students were giving real thought to this story. For example, one student, usually rather uninvolved, wrote: "Shouldn't you tell that Joy is a real happy, nice, pretty name and she might have changed it to spite her mother? Also I think growing up without a father could make her like this."

Of course, some of the comments I found on the papers might not have been entirely appropriate--and some were more honest than I might have wanted. One wrote to his group: "Please criticize the shit out of my paper. I need it." Another wrote, "I'm trying to decide if I should withdraw from calculus with an F and just take a different math next year." The scribbled answer was: "I think a lot of people are."

The next week I had the students evaluate the experiment, giving both advantages and disadvantages. And in spite of the fact that they had all expressed relief and even joy when the silence ended, they nevertheless gave generally positive comments about the experiment.

" Great environment to think and write in," one said.

Another said: "Written comments helpful to use when rewriting. People more serious. Could concentrate easier."

Still another: "Not talking was very difficult because it forced us to work."

One said: "The process makes you think of what you want to say before you actually write it down. But having to wait an extra 30 seconds before a reply came was hard on the nerves."

I thought this was an interesting comment: "We could be more honest in our critiques because we weren't watching the person's reaction. I felt more like a teacher--more helpful."

But another wrote: "...it was frustrating -- I couldn't communicate as well nor get my point across."

And finally, this comment: "I think some of us learned to communicate more efficiently. Communication is not just talking. It's getting a point across by the use of some form of language: sign, verbal, written, etc. The two silent days let our minds expand and acknowledge the presense of these different languages."

As for my own evaluation, I thought it was an extremely successful two-day experiment. I would not have carried it on any longer. And I would never have tried it at all if the class had not already been accustomed to working in groups and critiquing each other's papers. In fact, one of my colleagues tried this without having the discourse community already established. She had chaos, frustration, and very little productivity. But under

the right conditions, the experiment was valuable. It forced students to concentrate on and depend on written communication; it made them take their critiquing more seriously; it made them think; and it produced some good papers. And besides, there is value, I think, in change itself--in some dramatic change in the middle of the semester--when Spring is budding, when students are getting that glazed look, when you're beginning to look searchingly at your syllabus. You know what I mean.

"Portfolio Assessment and Program Development:
Toward a Coherent Theory of Advanced Writing."

James Hunter, Lynchburg College

At first glance, the problem I will be addressing in this paper would seem to be a little out of place. I will not be talking much about the mechanics of the portfolio system as we have used it -- my colleagues have done that and done it well already -- and I will not be talking about the freshman classes which were the focus of our efforts and the source of much of our success. Instead, I want to address another problem, the problem of advanced composition: specifically, the formulation of a coherent theory for its conduct and for its place in the larger community of the teaching of writing. The rationale for including it is quite simple: portfolio assessment -- with all its implications for dialogue among faculty and students, dialogue which cuts across the boundaries of courses and can cut across even the boundaries of departments and schools -- is a powerful tool for resolving the problem of theoretical coherence in the teaching of writing beyond the freshman level.

That there <u>is</u> a problem to be resolved is fairly well recognized. Consider even the announced topic for next year's section on advanced composition at the South Atlantic MLA: "Just what is 'advanced' about advanced composition?" Or consider the range of content which is generally held to come under the rubric of advanced writing courses. We ourselves offer a business

writing course and an historical writing course, as well as a course in classical rhetoric, a graduate course for secondary school teachers, and a generic sophomore-level course which is simply called "expository writing"; and all this is in addition to our developing writing-across-the-curriculum program, in which courses at all levels from a dozen departments share a core of readings and use them to teach writing in the context of particular disciplinary methodologies. Other institutions teach technical writing, professional writing, writing for nurses, for MBAs, for law students. Or the courses may be specialized in ways other than by field. One university that I know of proposed separate post-freshman courses in invention, organization and style. The diversity is enormous and, from the standpoint of any attempt at theoretical coherence, unwieldy. And it is a problem that is just beginning to be addressed.

The difficulty here is that the curriculum of advanced writing courses can only be talked about in the plural, not the singular. And to try to <u>treat</u> it programmatically as a singular would probably be disastrous. One of the characteristics of writing is that as its uses become more specialized, so do its forms; we cannot teach the same curriculum to business writers and technical writers and historians -- they must begin to write for their own professions, to join their own specialized discourse communities (and "discourse communities" is a somewhat embattled term which I will come back to in a moment).

However, if we cannot create common ground out of the design

of curriculum, we can do it from the other end -- from assessment of the products that come out of the curriculum. Here there can be commonality of judgement, even among those who are not themselves specialists in that particular area of discourse. There is a kind of academic common language, a shared ground, which allows us to participate, with some training, in the writing of others. And it is for this reason that portfolio assessment offers such an appropriate avenue for unifying our thinking about the field.

Now -- this brings us to the fundamental theoretical problem. My assumption is that we can speak meaningfully of a "discourse community" among academics, and that assessment, particularly portfolio assessment, can give us useful access to the shared values of that community.

This is not a self-evident assumption. Prof. Melbourne has already spoken of Joseph Harris's recent article in CCC. Mr. Harris has challenged the use of "discourse community" as a meaningful term in recent scholarship, and his critique is persuasive: he suggests that it "tends to mean little more than a nicer, friendlier, fuzzier version of what came before," (13) and suggests that "The question ... of just who this 'we' is that speaks 'our language' is never resolved." (14) He goes on to propose a reason for the difficulty:

> Part of this vagueness stems from the ways that the notion of "discourse community" has come into the study of writing -- drawing on one hand from the literary-philosophical idea of "interpretive community," and on the other from the sociolinguistic concept of "speech community," but without fully taking into account the

> differences between the two. ... while "interpretive community" can usually be taken to describe something like a world-view, discipline, or profession, "speech community" is generally used to refer more specifically to groupings like neighborhoods, settlements or classrooms. (14)

In short, when we talk about discourse communities, we ar apt to be either vague or ambiguous; and when we invoke the concept in argument, we are to some extent begging the question: we need to define it, not talk about it as though everyone already knows what it is.

With this point in mind, let us look briefly at some of the definitions that have been offered. One of the most famous, and most appealing, is from Kenneth Burke's Philosophy of Literary Form:

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (110-111)

Of course, this is not really a definition at all: it is a parable. It is wonderfully appealing, and it gives us a feeling for the sort of thing Burke is talking about, but it is not an

academically useful account -- you can't really do anything with it other than read it and enjoy it. Others have given more formal accounts (and I take only a random few of the more recent ones here). Deborah Brandt speaks of "socially forged conditions of mutual awareness"; Kenneth Bruffee has described (and continues to describe) an evolving social construction of knowledge; Patricia Bizzell writes, not altogether favorably, of an "academic world view," which more or less coincides with William Perry's final stage of cognitive development; David Bartholomae has his academy of discourse. These accounts are by no means identical, and are sometimes even contradictory; but they all share one thing in common: they try to get at our sense of the nature of community by giving it an intensional definition -- that is, by describing its essential characteristics. And most of them come in for their share of criticism from Prof. Harris.

I would urge, from our experience with portfolio evaluation, that there is another alternative. Instead of constructing intensional definitions of "community" -- something we have disagreed over among ourselves, often at great length -- we can offer an operational definition. The community of discourse -- our community of discourse -- is that body of shared values and standards which manifests itself in our general consensus on assessment of particular, discrete pieces of writing.

This sounds like a particularly barefaced attempt to beg the question: our discourse community is whatever our portfolio

system manages to tap; therefore we must be participating in a discourse community. I am not, however, just taking refuge in a piece of petitio principii. For any "community of discourse," if that community may be said to exist at all, exists only in discourse itself, and in the shared and debated judgements which we make about discourse. It exists, in other words, in that very process by which we make the collaborative and consensual judgements of portfolio evaluation. It may well be that we cannot know what it "really" is in any intensional way; attempts to do so may always come out sounding vague and may never be as useful as we need them to be. But what we can know, through daily experience, is how a discourse community manifests itself. And it is these manifestations of shared standards that our portfolio evaluations have made both accessible and useful. The standards are not immutable: they change. And consensus is not unanimous: we disagree. But we all have become relatively comfortable with the judgements we make as a group, and we may reasonably regard them as a reflection of what we -- we as a group, not as individuals, any one of whom may disagree on individual occasions -- hold in common.

And this brings me back to the problem I originally set out to address: the formulation of a coherent theory of advanced composition. I have suggested that assessment is a more fruitful point of departure for addressing the problem than curriculum design, and my reason for this is that assessment, especially collaborative assessment like portfolio evaluation, allows us to

use the notion of an academic discourse community in pragmatically effective ways. So far, our experience with portfolio evaluation bears me out. I cannot give you final results, for we are still in the process of experimenting with what happens when we widen the field of our activities to include writing beyond the freshman level, but I can at least tell you what we have done and sketch the work still in progress.

The first point at which we had to address the problem of curricular diversity was not in an "advanced" course at all, but in the second semester of freshman English. The first semester had gone through a personal/expository/analytic sequence which was fairly standard for all sections; we could expect clear categories of papers because we all shared the same curricular design. In the second semester, however, course content began to diverge: some faculty taught literary analysis, others taught research writing, still others treated the course as a class in argumentation, and some simply continued doing more of the same from the first semester. This posed problems for the participants in the portfolio project. Suddenly we did not have any standardization of curriculum to fall back on in making our judgements. I found myself scoring personal essays at an advanced level when I did not have any second semester papers of that sort of my own to compare; some of my colleagues had to evaluate research writing from my class, when all they were teaching was literary criticism. There was a sense of garbled expectations, and several of us shared the fear that we were less

reliable in our own scoring than we had been in the first semester.

Several things came out of this experience during the second semester of the freshman project. First of all, actual reliability (as opposed to feared reliability) did not go down at all; if anything, it went up slightly. The best figures I have been able to put together indicate reliability, within a one point spread, of somewhere around the 90% range. We may have felt uncertain about our standards, but our actual judgements remained very close and very consistent. Second, it has given us options for the way we approach the problem during the present semester. Our first inclination was to investigate ways to standardize the content of the courses -- to attack the problem from the direction of curriculum design. But we have a second option as well -- to simply continue using portfolio assessment as a means of sustaining community of standards and to allow, deliberately, greater diversity of course content. And the second option gives us the assurance that we really need -- that our sections do have shared goals and that we are guiding our students toward them in coherent, even if differing, ways.

About the actual advanced courses in writing I cannot report quite so definitely, for this is truly work in progress. In my sophomore-level expository writing course, the first "dry run" is just coming up now. I ran one informal assessment session earlier in the semester, working with a student who is acting as a TA for me in the class; the session ran smoothly, with almost

identical scores and not even the need for a third reader. This much is evident already: the usefulness of portfolio evaluation for tutor and TA training is enormous, for we had to discuss scores and what they meant in great detail -- in short, we had to begin to make those shared standards which portfolio evaluation assumes more conscious and explicit. I hope for the same sort of results from the dry run itself: the standards for the course will acquire a more firmly departmental and less potentially idiosyncratic base, not because I have been told what to teach, but because we have shared what we value.

The use of portfolio evaluation in writing-across-the-curriculum is even more promising. We have had no trouble finding interested faculty to participate in a pilot project this semester, but once again the first dry run has not yet occurred. What the project should accomplish, however, is to meet two of the needs which are most often troublesome in established programs: the need for ongoing training of faculty in the teaching and evaluating of writing and the need to create sustained dialogue among participants after the first flush of enthusiasm is over. Portfolio evaluation demands that participating faculty meet regularly, and meet not for a general discussion of indeterminate nature (the shortcoming of most brown-bag solutions to the problem of continued faculty involvement in cross-curricular programs) but with a definite project in mind. It also demands that they continually reconsider the goals of their own teaching of writing, and that

they talk out what these goals are in order to give them concrete form in evaluation. In other words, it keeps faculty talking about writing, not just during a summer workshop which can be left behind once the real and messy work of teaching actually begins, but throughout the term and with real application to the messy real world. It should also offer a kind of ongoing training which preparatory advice and assistance on course design cannot give; it will allow us as writing teachers to train ourselves in the act instead of before it.

The results are not all in yet; our projects are still in progress. But the basic approach promises much. The difficulties of formulating a systematic conception of the nature of advanced composition are great when we look for common elements of course design and curricular content; they become much less great when we establish, as a collaborative group, common goals and standards in the act of assessment. Portfolio assessment can be used to create the kind of dialogue, across courses and across the curriculum, which is essential for establishing coherence in the teaching of writing beyond the freshman level. It is here that the interpretive community and the speech community intersect, in an accessible and pragmatically useful discourse community, one which is known from the actual manifestations of its shared values and standards -- known, that is, in the only way it can be known, and perhaps in the only way it can be said with certainty to exist.

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